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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAMA 000257

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND,
ADMIRAL FALLON'S MARCH 22-23 AND 27-28 VISITS TO BAHRAIN

REF: STATE 33984

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Admiral Fallon, we warmly welcome your March 22-23 and 27-28 visits to Bahrain. The fifty-year U.S. Navy presence in Bahrain is the centerpiece of the U.S.-Bahrain bilateral relationship. Bahrain considers the Navy to be its defense against external threats, starting with Iran, and has recently taken important steps to enhance bilateral relations further. Bahrain generally supports our Iraq policy but believes we should withdraw from major population centers, leaving only a rapid-reaction force in country. The GOB is mistrustful of the Iraqi government and wants to see PM Maliki make greater movement toward reconciliation with Iraq's Sunnis and a willingness to work more closely with its Arab neighbors. Bahrain is an enthusiastic participant in the interagency Gulf Security Dialogue (GSD) initiative. At the last meeting, on March 8 in Washington, Crown Prince Salman pushed hard to get Patriot missiles for Bahrain. The CP met with the Vice President, Secretary Gates, Deputy Secretary England, and others during his visit.

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Objectives

¶12. (C) What we want from the visit:

-- Continued cooperation on regional maritime operations, including in Coalition Task Forces (CTF) 150 and 152 in and around the Gulf.

-- Close coordination on Iran policy.

-- Support for U.S. policy in Iraq and a commitment for pro-active Bahraini engagement with Iraq's leadership, at a minimum at the upcoming Arab League Summit and Iraq Neighbors Ministerial meeting.

Issues of Interest to Bahrain

¶13. (C) The Bahrainis will want to hear from you on:

-- A reaffirmation of the Navy's long-term commitment to Bahrain and U.S. interest in protecting Bahrain.

-- Recognition of Bahrain's public and private steps to align with and support the United States, including recent senior-level visits to Washington, participating in the Proliferation Security Initiative, joining the Coalition Task

Forces and deploying a special forces contingent to Afghanistan.

-- Your thoughts on the way forward in Iraq, with particular emphasis on the Iraqi government's responsibilities and ways the GCC can engage and assist.

-- Strategies to contain Iran while avoiding a military confrontation.

Key Issues to Raise

¶4. (C) We suggest you raise the following points:

-- Recognize the long history of mil-mil cooperation with Bahrain, most notably through hosting NAVCENT. Reaffirm the commitment of the U.S. Navy in Bahrain.

-- Appreciate the positive steps the government has taken on counter-terrorism since the departure of Navy dependents in 2004 and caution on the need to remain vigilant.

-- Praise Bahrain's support for OEF, OIF, and U.S. policy on Iraq and Iran. Commend Bahrain for sending its Special Forces contingent to Afghanistan in support of OEF, hosting and participating in Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercise Leading Edge in October 2006, and formally joining the regional coalition naval task forces.

-- Solicit views on the way forward on Iran and Iraq.

-- Pledge to continue the close coordination between our two countries on Iran.

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Issues Background Briefs

Military Relations

¶5. (SBU) The U.S. Navy has worked closely with Bahrain for more than 50 years. When the U.S. Fifth Fleet was re-commissioned in 1995, Bahrain took the then-controversial step of being the first Gulf state to provide host government support for regionally "home-ported" U.S. Navy forces. Bahrain remains the only country in the region that hosts a permanent component command headquarters.

¶6. (C) Bahrain's relatively stable and secure political environment allows deployed U.S. Navy ships to stop, replenish supplies, and provide crews much needed onshore rest and recreation opportunities. Bahrain is currently one of the U.S. Navy's busiest overseas ports. In direct support of OEF and OIF, Bahrain in 2003 deployed 1,500 troops, a tank battalion task force, and its frigate the RNBS Sabha to defend Kuwait. Bahrain also flew combat air patrols over Kuwait and Bahrain and continues to keep F-16s on 24-7 strip alert. A special operations unit embedded in a UAE contingent deployed to Afghanistan in 2005. Bahrain assigned three shore-based naval officers to work in the command post for maritime task force CTF-150, which covers the Strait of Hormuz to the Sea of Aden. For CTF-152, which covers central Gulf waters, Bahrain has provided one frigate and two corvettes. Bahrain was the first GCC country to participate in the CTFs.

¶7. (C) With limited petroleum resources, Bahrain faces greater budget constraints than its large Gulf neighbors and does not have the financial ability to fund military equipment sustainment and upgrades needed to maintain

interoperability with the U.S. and to purchase equipment to defend the country. We have had active FMF and IMET programs in Bahrain for several years but the FMF program in particular has declined precipitously in recent years, from \$90 million in 2003, to a budgeted \$15 million for FY 2007, to a projected \$4 million for FY 2008. We are working closely with the Bahrainis on the CENTCOM Bilateral Air Defense Initiative and an upgrade for their early warning and air defense radar systems, a program that has been promoted in the Gulf Security Dialogue. Future programs include the sale of nine Blackhawk helicopters to the Bahraini Air Force (\$200 million) and six Bell helicopters to the Ministry of Interior (approximately \$70 million). A proposal to provide two MK-V Fast Patrol Boats to the Bahraini Navy through counter-terrorism (1206) funding is awaiting signature by the Secretaries of State and Defense. Six Boston Whalers that

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were originally programmed for Thailand will be diverted to Bahrain. This transfer has been approved by the Departments of State and Defense and is pending congressional approval.

Gulf Security Dialogue

¶ 8. (S) Crown Prince Salman led the Bahraini delegation to a March 8 session of the interagency Gulf Security Dialogue in Washington (reftel). Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte opened the meeting and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs Mull and Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Long

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headed the U.S. delegation. The two sides discussed Iran, Defense Cooperation, Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Proliferation, and Iraq. During the meeting, the Crown Prince said that air defense is the major hole in Bahrain's defenses and he requested USG consideration for providing Patriot missiles. Acting A/S Long explained that the USG supply of Patriots does not meet current demand, but she undertook to explore creative solutions.

Next Steps on Iraq

¶ 9. (C) The GOB publicly supports U.S. operations in Iraq, but as King Hamad and Crown Prince Salman have said several times, it believes Iraqi forces should be moving to the front lines in place of coalition forces. This would force Iraqis to take responsibility for their own security and put the GOI into the position of requesting assistance from its Arab neighbors, which the Bahrainis feel it has not yet done in a meaningful way. The Crown Prince suggested that PM Maliki visit the GCC countries to establish better ties. Bahrain is

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mistrustful of the Iraqi government and it would like to see Maliki make greater moves to reconcile with Iraq's Sunnis. Bahrain participated in the recent sub-ministerial Iraq Neighbors meeting in Baghdad and will participate in the upcoming Iraq Neighbors Ministerial. The GOB's greatest concerns related to Iraq are excessive Iranian influence over the government of Iraq, and that sectarian violence could spill over into Bahrain, which has a Shia-majority population ruled by a Sunni-controlled government. GOB officials will support long-term measures to reduce sectarian violence while recognizing that the near-term situation in Iraq is extremely difficult.

Dealing With Iran

¶ 10. (C) The Bahraini leadership is greatly concerned about

the threat posed by Iran and increased tensions between Iran and the international community. Crown Prince Salman has suggested several times that the U.S. and GCC countries hold a significant military exercise in the Gulf, which would send a strong signal to Iran. Bahrain hosted and participated in PSI exercise Leading Edge in October, and the boarding/interrogation portion took place just outside its territorial waters. NAVCENT personnel were impressed with the Bahraini Navy's professionalism and aggressiveness during the exercise.

¶11. (C) The Bahraini leadership is united in its suspicion of Iranian intentions regarding Bahrain and often sees an Iranian hand in incidents involving Bahrain's Shia community, which comprises some two-thirds of the country's citizens. They are convinced Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons and assert its influence around the region. Bahrain supports UN Security Council resolutions applying sanctions on Iran. At the GSD meeting, the CP suggested launching multiparty negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue, modeled on the Six Party Talks with North Korea. He thought it would be useful for a regional power, such as Saudi Arabia, to join the major world powers in negotiating with Iran.

¶12. (C) At the same time, Bahrain faces the reality that it must live with its large neighbor across the Gulf. Bahrain maintains "correct" but not warm diplomatic relations with Iran, with Bahraini leaders meeting with Iranian officials when they visit and occasional Bahraini visits to Tehran. Bahraini officials repeatedly assert their strong view that the international community should engage in diplomacy to deal with Iran, and not resort to a military solution. They recognize, however, that a robust military posture can facilitate diplomacy.

Return of U.S. Dependents

¶13. (C) Bahraini officials often reiterate their request that the U.S. Navy permit dependents to return to Bahrain. Crown Prince Salman, who is a graduate of the DOD Bahrain School and whose children now attend the school, is a particularly strong advocate for the everyday, people-to-people contact that is fostered by the presence of dependents. Bahraini officials may urge your support in reconsidering the Navy's 2004 decision removing dependents from Bahrain.

Elections

¶14. (C) Bahrain in November/December 2006 conducted its second set of parliamentary and municipal elections since the adoption of the 2002 constitution. Some 70 percent of registered voters and all political societies participated in the elections, with oppositionists winning 18 of 40 seats in the elected lower house Council of Representatives. Thirty-two seats are held by Islamists (Sunni and Shia) and membership is marked by a stark Sunni-Shia divide. One woman, Lateefa Al Qaoud, ran unopposed and is Bahrain's first female elected member of parliament. Local election monitors reported that although there were allegations of the government rigging election outcomes, they uncovered no tangible evidence of such activity. However, they said that Bahrain's electoral constituencies were not drawn in accordance with the principle of "one man, one vote," resulting in a parliamentary majority of 23 Sunnis representing a group estimated to comprise one-third of the population. The elections are, however, seen as a major step forward in the King's democratic reform program.

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